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BOSTON'S DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM:
POLICIES ON CULTURAL CENTERS AND INSTITUTIONS

A background paper prepared for
The Cultural Foundation of Boston, Inc.



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BOSTON'S DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM:
POLICIES ON CULTURAL CENTERS AND INSTITUTIONS

The Boston Redevelopment Authority is responsible for the formulation of policies to guide the future development of the City. The general policies applicable to the entire City--the City "core" and its larger region-- are contained in the 1965/1975 General Plan; the more detailed policies relating to specific areas of the City are contained in the urban renewal plans. Those policies focusing on the City's cultural development, as found in the General Plan and urban renewal plans, will be reviewed in this report.

The General Plan

The 1965/1975 General Plan for the City of Boston and the Regional Core is a statement of policies to guide the future development of the City. The plan sets forth "long-range goals of the Development Program, means by which they may be achieved, and standards by which they may be appraised."

The plan describes the needs of the cultural institutions, which it calls an "indispensable asset" to Boston, in the section "Policy on Performing Arts and Cultural Activities:"

Their greatest need is for a Regionally central location, with convenient access to each other, to adequate transportation, parking, and related commercial facilities. (p. 85.)

The plan therefore establishes as one of the major policies the maintenance of the "Regional Core"* as the dominant cultural and entertainment center of the region. Three reasons given for this policy are: the "Core" already represents a "heavy investment

consists
*The "Regional Core", ~~is made up~~ ^{for} the center toward which the whole metropolitan area is oriented, ~~is made up~~ of five General Neighborhood Renewal Plan areas: Downtown North, Downtown (including South Cove area), South End, Back Bay, and Parker ~~Hill~~-Fenway.


in institutional growth;" it is centrally located for the whole metropolitan area and is therefore easily accessible; and it has a concentration of supporting activities.

The General Plan also establishes two major policies for cultural development outside the Regional Core: the provision of multi-function cores where large, new cultural institutions "can be shared by related activities and their dispersed audience can be easily assembled;" and the provision of small, dispersed cultural centers to serve small ventures and purely local markets.

The General Plan further expands upon the first of these three major policies and the means by which it is to be attained; ~~it states the means by which the~~ policy for the maintenance of the Regional Core as the dominant cultural center is to be achieved.

To this end, the largest and most influential cultural and entertainment institutions should be buttressed in the Core by additional private cultural and entertainment facilities, supporting consumer services, pedestrian walkways, and off-street parking, both through rehabilitation and new construction. (p. 85.)

The Plan identifies three centers of cultural development within the Regional Core toward which the policy on cultural activities is directed: 1) the Fine Arts Museum/Symphony Hall Area as the center for visual and musical arts; 2) the Stuart/Kneeland/Tremont Area as the center for legitimate theater; and 3) the Quincy Market/Faneuil Hall/Blackstone Area as the location for "minor performing arts and a combination of cultural activities with a historical flavor."



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Each of these three centers of cultural development in the Regional Core is affected by one or more urban renewal projects: the first by the Fenway Urban Renewal Plan; the second by both the South Cove and Central Business District Urban Renewal Plans; and the third by the Waterfront Urban Renewal Plan. The policies of these plans detail those for the three cultural centers identified in the General Plan.

Fine Arts Museum/Symphony Hall Area

Both the General Plan and the Fenway Urban Renewal Plan recognize the importance of this area as the center for visual and musical arts. The Fenway Plan establishes as the primary objectives for the renewal of the Symphony Area the elimination of blighting conditions and the development of housing and commercial facilities compatible with the character of the area. In addition, sidewalk restaurants, theaters, and similar facilities will be encouraged to complement the major cultural facilities. In the Museum Area the major concern of the plan is to "improve circulation and to provide for the orderly expansion of the area's institutions."

(pp. 8 and 9.)

The Symphony Area contains the War Memorial Auditorium, the Theater Company of Boston, the Back Bay Theater, Symphony Hall, Jordan Hall, and the Boston University Theater as its major facilities. The Museum Area contains the Museum of Fine Arts and The Gardner Museum. Each of these facilities will be in some way affected by the renewal plan, perhaps by the recommendation that the facility be

retained unchanged, or that it be strengthened by additional supporting activities, or that its environment be enhanced, or that the facility be replaced.

near
The Theater Company of Boston, which moved to its new location in the Sherry Biltmore Hotel on Massachusetts Avenue in 1967, is not involved in the musical arts. It is a small repertory theater.

at 136 Mass. Ave is the former Fenway Theater
However, its present location is considered only temporary. It is *the the permanent location* expected that the Company will eventually move back to the Stuart/Kneeland/Tremont Area to which it is better suited and where *after* the renewal plans recommend several new theaters.

The War Memorial Auditorium was built by the City in 1965 as a multi-purpose facility. Although touring opera and ballet performances have been held there, the most satisfactory use of the auditorium is for conventions. Eventually, a proposed new opera house will relieve the auditorium of some of its non-convention functions.

The Back Bay Theater will be permanently closed at the end of the 1967/1968 performing season. The Christian Science Mother Church, which owns the theater, will replace *at* the ~~facility~~ with new residential and commercial buildings as part of its extensive private *no* development program. The Opera Company of Boston and the Boston Ballet Company, which considered the theater their home, as well as the many touring musical and dance ensembles will be faced with the dilemma of finding a place to perform for the following seasons until they have a new, permanent home.

A new opera house is still but a dream, though daily coming closer to realization. As a facility serving the musical arts, it is functionally suited to the Symphony Area. Recognizing this, the Fenway planning team is studying several alternative locations for the opera house in the Symphony Area; the locations they consider best are those which are closest to Symphony Hall itself.

Symphony Hall, which is the home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the scene for numerous other musical performances, is, of course, one of the focal points of the Fine Arts Museum/Symphony Hall cultural center. The urban renewal plan provides for the visual and functional improvement of the area around the Hall by the construction of a plaza and by the development of ancillary commercial facilities in the vicinity.

In very close proximity to Symphony Hall are Boston University Theater for dramatic performances and Jordan Hall for chamber music and recitals. Both facilities further emphasize the role of the Museum/Symphony Area as a major cultural center of Boston, and both will benefit from the general improvements of the area.

The Area's other focal point is the Museum of Fine Arts. The classical proportions of this facility for the visual arts is given added emphasis by the vast open space of the nearby Fens; however, the much smaller Gardner Museum, which is another element in this center for the visual arts, is also in the vicinity. The policy of the urban renewal plan is to improve this ^{area} by enhancing the Fens, improving traffic circulation, and providing room for the expansion of the Museum of Fine Arts by air rights development over the proposed Inner Belt Expressway.

Stuart/Kneeland/Tremont Area

This cultural center dominated by the "legitimate" theater straddles both the South Cove and Central Business District Urban Renewal Areas. The Urban renewal plans for both areas contain objectives detailing the major policy of the General Plan. The design objectives of the South Cove Plan for the "Entertainment and Commercial District" are "to enhance its character as an entertainment district, to substantially increase the supply of off-street parking and to meet the potential market in this part of Downtown for retail, office and other commercial space." (p. 7.)

To this end, multi-purpose structures combining retail, parking, and general commercial uses are encouraged on Stuart Street, and theaters, night clubs, restaurants and related entertainment facilities are encouraged on the proposed public square as well as on Stuart and Tremont Streets. Sidewalk restaurants, community theaters, and similar uses which could particularly relate to the adjacent public open space and to the nearby residential areas are especially encouraged in Parcels C-1 and C-2. (p. 8)

In the Central Business District Urban Renewal Plan the Hinge Area-- so called because of the pivotal position of the block between downtown and the Back Bay--functions as part of the theater and entertainment district. The block, which is bounded by Tremont, Boylston, Washington, and Stuart Streets, will be almost totally redeveloped. The plan intends that this block become the "focal point of the theater and entertainment district," more specifically, "for"the visual and performing arts." The design objectives of the renewal plan for the Hinge Block

are "to provide new investment opportunities for commercial facilities, transient and residential housing, and theater or related cultural uses; (and) to strengthen the relationship between Downtown and Back Bay business areas through appropriate new development." (p. 15.) The plan proposes to accomplish these objectives by carefully designing the Hinge Block.

The most important architectural feature of the hinge block should be its intimate interior public open space offering a great contrast to the openness of the adjacent Common and the strongly commercial character of the surrounding streets. This open space not only will function for pedestrian circulation, but will give strollers, shoppers and theater-goers an opportunity to experience a truly urban space free from traffic and noise during the day and night.

Building design should take every advantage of the double frontage potential of the interior open space and the surrounding streets. The interior frontages should form space which can be used for outdoor concerts and art exhibitions as well as for sitting. (p. 14.)

So important an element in the downtown plan is the Hinge Block considered that the Committee on the Central Business District and the Boston Redevelopment Authority together published in 1966 a promotional pamphlet "The Hinge Block: an Opportunity for the Arts in Boston" extolling the development potentials of the area.

Existing theaters affected by both the South Cove and Central Business District Urban Renewal Plans include the Charles Playhouse, the Shubert Theater, the Music Hall (which is used for touring groups as well as for movies), the Wilbur Theater, and the Colonial Theater.

The Charles Playhouse, a repertory theater located on Warrenton Street, anticipates moving to a new facility which will double its seating capacity. About a year ago it considered buying and remodeling the former First Corps Cadet Armory located at Stuart and Arlington Streets, but the University of Massachusetts had first choice to lease the building for a library. Currently, the Playhouse is considered a potential developer, along with another group, of Parcel C-1, mentioned in the South Cove Plan objectives as a prime site for a theater and related activities.

Around the corner from the Charles is the Shubert Theater, and about two blocks away is the Colonial Theater. Both the Shubert ~~Theater~~ and Colonial offer pre-Broadway productions and are considered the major theaters of Boston. Although neither is directly affected by urban renewal proposals, both should benefit by the overall improvement of the theater district.

However, across the street from the Shubert, the Wilbur and Music Hall Theaters along with other buildings owned by Tufts-New England Medical Center will be demolished sometime after 1975 for the completion of the last phase of the hospital expansion program. Since it is one of the legitimate theaters, the Wilbur should at that time be relocated within the area, perhaps in one of the theaters in the Hinge Block, or in the renovated Armory. The Music Hall now serves the dual function of movie house and theater for musical and dance touring groups. Its replacement post 1975

as a cinema will probably not be difficult considering the trend to very small theaters, and its replacement as a large theater (4,200 seats) for dance and musical performances will quite likely be unnecessary in that a new opera house will hopefully have been ~~already~~ built. But in the meantime the Music Hall can play an important role as temporary home for the opera and ballet.

As is apparent by their objectives, the South Cove and Central Business District Urban Renewal Plans will also create opportunities for "legitimate" theater. At least one, but as many as three or four theaters can be included in the developments on the several parcels along Stuart and Tremont Streets and on the public plaza in the South Cove. But thus far the only potential developer which has shown interest in ^{one of these} ~~this~~ parcel has been the Charles Playhouse.

Although not a development parcel and although not strictly within the confines of the South Cove's theater district, the former First Corps Cadet Armory is near enough to the theater area to be considered an excellent potential facility when it is vacated in 1972 at the termination of the current lease. The feasibility of using the building for a theater and related activities was demonstrated in a study prepared by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in 1966.

immediately → Another theater or two and important subordinate activities can be ^{located} ~~located~~ in the Hinge Block of the Central Business District. The area has been described by some as the new Scollay Square of Boston because of its recent rapid deterioration. But with the

environment improved through the urban renewal programs, the Hinge Block itself can provide the greatest potential for the theater district. It is anticipated that its completely redesigned 186,000 square feet will contain a new theater, high rise apartments and perhaps a hotel, commercial space, and a plaza at the interior of the block. According to the promotional pamphlet commercial activities which might enhance the theater atmosphere might include "a library, art galleries, night clubs, restaurants, speciality shops, an in-town museum, and small movie theaters." The pamphlet concludes:

The "Hinge Block" is seen as an important renewal proposal which can provide a major opportunity for the performing arts and related entertainment activities, and, at the same time, eliminate a blighting influence in the CBD. Such a development can be deemed feasible only if there is enthusiastic support leading to sound developer interest, with a well-developed program for financial backing. If such a program can be created, the "Hinge Block" could become a reality with great significance for the future of culture and recreation in the New Boston.

Quincy Market/Faneuil Hall/Blackstone Area

The General Plan describes this area as the cultural center for the "minor performing arts and a combination of cultural activities with a historical flavor." However, the Waterfront Urban Renewal Plan, which covers this area, does not deal directly with it as a cultural center, but rather as a place with an important historical character. The design objectives for the "Faneuil Hall-Blackstone Market Area" reflect this orientation.

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It is intended that the historic uniqueness of this area be retained through a thoughtful blend of new construction, rehabilitation and conservation.

. . .

Retention of those areas which are compatible with the objectives of the renewal plan, such as restaurants, retail food stores and the traditional week-end push-cart market, is desirable. Introduction of new general business, institutional, office and residential uses which serve to upgrade the area and create an active pedestrian link, maximizing pedestrian protection under unfavorable weather conditions, between Government Center and the Waterfront are to be encouraged. (p. 10.)

In order to supplement this somewhat deficient image of the area as presented in the urban renewal plan, the Waterfront planning team intends to add a "night life flavor" to the historical character. The most important element sustaining the night-time activity is to be a small theater, perhaps in the Blackstone Block. Other activities will include small art galleries, craft shops and other small shops, an exhibition hall in Quincy Market, restaurants, and cafes. These activities, along with the Ancient and Honorable Museum and the public forum at Faneuil Hall, the shops in the Blackstone Block, and the food displays and push carts at Quincy Market, if they create a cultural center at all, create Boston's small-scale Covent Garden.

The policy to create a cultural center in the Quincy Market/Faneuil Hall/Blackstone Area is less well articulated as to detail than are the policies for the other two centers. Therefore, the concept is presently extremely flexible and will remain so for a year or two, or until the idea can be more actively promoted.

Conclusions

The effects of the urban renewal programs on the three cultural centers will be the removal of three facilities and the provision of at least four new ones. The Back Bay Theater will be demolished at the close of the 1967/1968 performing season, and the Wilbur and Music Hall Theaters will be closed in 1975. The new opera house, which would probably not be completed before 1972, will replace the Back Bay Theater. At least ~~one~~^{three} new theaters for dramatic performances will be constructed in the Hinge Block, on either Parcel C-1 or C-2 near the public plaza in the South Cove, and in the Blackstone Block of the Waterfront Area. These theaters will probably not be open before 1975. If adequate developer interest is shown, as many as three or four additional theaters can be provided in the Symphony ^{Area} and ^{in the} Stuart/Kneeland/Tremont Area~~s~~. One of these theaters could be housed in the former First Corps Cadet Armory, which will be available in 1972.

The theater groups that need to take advantage of these development opportunities are the Opera Company of Boston, the Boston Ballet Company, the Charles Playhouse, the Theater Company of Boston, and the touring groups which currently use the Wilbur Theater.

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